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ABSTRACT

Using data from a study that examined the writing of basic skills and regular college freshman students on three separate tasks, this paper discusses the effect that translating a generalized task into one that engages personal commitment by the writer has on the cognitive strategies employed to respond to that task. After a discussion of the cognitive model used to analyze the student papers--which was developed by A. Wilkerson and his associates and which reflects movement from concrete to abstract reasoning processes--the paper reviews several changes that occurred in their papers as students responded to the different writing tasks and transformed them from generalized tasks into meaningful ones. The major portion of the paper examines the responses of one student in order to illustrate each of the changes that occurred. The paper concludes that multiple texts must be considered in order to evaluate accurately a student's writing ability and performance, and that a writer must be strongly urged to create a meaningful task from a generalized one if he or she is going to exercise increasingly complex cognitive strategies. (FL)

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How Commitment to a Task Stimulates Critical Thinking Processes

It has become a truism of composition research today to say that more than one piece of writing from a student needs to be examined before it is possible to make any meaningful assessment of the student's writing ability. What has not yet been explored is the effect that translating a generalized task into one that engages personal commitment by the writer has on the cognitive strategies employed to respond to that task.

In a recent study (Sternglass, 1983) where I examined the writing of basic skills and regular freshman composition students from three universities on the same three tasks, one calling for expository development, one calling for argumentative development, and the third calling for speculative development, I found that the degree to which the student writers transformed the generalized tasks into ones that were personally meaningful to them affected strongly their critical and creative thinking processes and their ability to apply complex cognitive strategies to the problems that they had posed for themselves.

In this paper, I will describe several types of changes that occurred. First, I will describe briefly the cognitive model used to analyze the student papers and then present one case study to illustrate the changes in cognitive processes.

The model used was one developed by Andrew Wilkinson and his associates in Assessing Language Development (1980). The cognitive processes aspect of this model reflects movement from concrete to abstract reasoning processes.

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The first two categories, Describing and Interpreting, are envisaged as concrete operational (in Piaget's terms), and the second two categories, Generalizing and Speculating, are seen as moving toward formal operational use, although the Generalizing category contains aspects of both concrete and formal operations. Mike Rose (1983) has wisely cautioned against labelling students too rigidly on Piaget's scale because it is important to examine those situations in which students can generalize and analyze, i.e. operate formally, and distinguish them from the situations in which they cannot. According to Rose, the area of difficulty is the "unfamiliar web of reasoning/reading/writing conventions that are fundamental to academic inquiry" (p. 127). What I am attempting to explore in this paper is the range of cognitive strategies that are available to student writers when they are attempting to respond to tasks within academic constraints, especially different types of tasks that appear to call upon different cognitive strategies.

It was not surprising to me to find in my larger study that more complex cognitive strategies were generated by the students as the task demands appeared to become more complex. What was surprising to me was the degree to which individual students did or did not translate the generalized tasks into something personally meaningful to themselves and by doing so raised or lowered their level of commitment to the writing they were producing.

Since the three tasks were based on readings shared by all the class members and the instructors, that meant that there was a great deal of information shared by the writer and his or her potential reader(s), whether they were the instructor or the classmates. This shared knowledge also meant that the degree to which the writer remained tied to the source readings and the class discussion determined whether the information or perspective introduced would or would not generate any genuine interest

or enthusiasm for either the writer or the reader because it was possible that no new information or perspective would be included in the paper being produced.

What happened for the students was that many attempted to pose questions for investigation of the topics that had the potential for original development, but that question was not fruitfully explored. To illustrate the relationship between commitment to the task and complexity of cognitive operations, I will describe two aspects of the nature of response that developed for one of the case study students in my study: the degree to which she posed and responded to her translations of the generalized tasks and the degree to which she relied on or freed herself from the source texts.

The case study student was a female basic skills student at a large mid-western university. The first task, calling for expository development, was based on the reading of two personal essays. Students were directed to explore possible common ideas or perspectives displayed in the essays. They were guided toward developing synthesizing ideas to relate the essays and then asked to select a particular emphasis or point of view to develop. Typical synthesizing topics included the following: "To Gain Yet Lose," "A Life With Two Roots," "Conflicts in Roles," and "Success and Happiness--An Intangible Pair." Most students developed their papers through the expository approach of comparison and contrast. As can be seen from the nature of this generalized task, students appeared to be explicitly directed to stay close to the source materials and they were only peripherally encouraged to bring their own experiences into their analyses.

The case study student titled her paper, "Career Choices: Are They Really Worth It?" She drew on a great deal of evidence from the source

texts to develop the point that the authors of the personal essays were separated from their families because of their career choices, but she never addressed the original question she posed, was it worth it? She developed the cause and effect aspects of the issue, but she failed to employ critical thinking skills that would lead her to evaluate the evidence she cited so that she could attempt to answer the question she had raised.

A brief excerpt from her paper captures the flavor of her presentation:

> Both Rodriguez and Ullmann were somewhat separated from their families because of the career choices they had made. They had both decided at an earlier time in their lives that they wanted to have a higher standard of living as compared to what they would have had. Rodriguez wanted a better education and Ulman wanted the wonderful life of an actress.

Even in the conclusion of the paper, no assessment is made of the implications of the individuals' decisions:

> The two stories do have quite a lot in common, but I think the main point that they convey is that they were both striving to have their own identity--and in the process they gave up something--their past lives, and their families.

Thus, the writer comes so far--but no further. What has been given up is articulated, but not the assessment of whether the gain was worth the loss, the question originally formulated. In this paper, then, the student writer has started to transform a generalized task into a personally meaningful one, but she is not yet able to fulfill the promise of that translation.

For the second task, students read a variety of essays on the topic of the value of a college education. They were then instructed to develop a point of view and take a position on the general issue of the value of a college education. They were directed to list the major arguments and

counter-arguments from the source texts so that they could be acknowledged or refuted. As in the earlier task, they were told to look for ways to relate the arguments and counter arguments from the source materials. Prior to reading the source materials, the students participated in class discussions that centered on their own reasons for deciding to enter college, so it was hoped that the students would bring their own experiences into their argumentative papers.

The case study student again formulated the title of her paper as a question, "Is education all it's made out to be?" She states her hypothesis in entirely positive terms and selects evidence from the source readings to support that position. She supplements the evidence from the source readings with examples from her world knowledge which she then assesses, two steps that had not occurred in her first paper. Furthermore, she questions one of the assumptions found in the source readings, another cognitive strategy she had not employed in the response to the first task.

Two samples from her essay illustrate these developments:

> For example, someone may have a degree for teaching, yet they may end up managing a small business instead. This job of which has some potential. There are also appealing jobs available that don't require a college education. For some occupations, such as skilled trades and some technical fields, special training can give one better credentials than a Bachelor's degree in liberal arts.
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> My third and final argument is that the controversy over educations worth has moved beyond its monetary benefits to less tangible areas. Areas in personal development and life enrichment. For example, in theory a student is taught to develop their values and goals of themselves through college, but there's no assurance that going to college can affect anyone in this way, college alone cannot take all the credit.

> Most people have already acquired certain values before even going to college, it may just be a matter of strenghening these already acquired values.

This latter example demonstrates her potential for independent analysis which is further developed in her third paper. It also illustrates Vygotsky's notion of a zone of proximal development (1978) through which students are moved from their actual development level as determined by independent problem solving to the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In other words, here the student is being stimulated by an instructionally more challenging task. She is beginning to respond by being willing to question assertions from the source readings and to state her own analysis.

In the third task, intended to be developed from a speculative perspective, students were asked to reflect on possible family structures in the year 2000. Perhaps because of the controversial nature of some of the source readings, in particular an excerpt from B.F. Skinner's Walden Two and a description of an actual community modeled on Skinner's fictive one, a considerable number of students chose to critique the structures pictured by Skinner rather than construct their own. But the case study student whose work is being presented here was virtually liberated by this task. In a rather dramatic breakthrough, she began to search her own world knowledge and experience to support her views on her topic, "Our Changing Sex Roles," the first generalized task truly transformed by her into something personally meaningful.

In this paper she takes a position and proceeds to develop it with information from the source readings, from her personal experience, and from projections of her current world knowledge. The information from this range of sources is integrated into her points of development and then

assessed and evaluated. She adopts a moral stance about human relationships that she wishes to convey to her readers. Although her paper presents an idealized view of human relationships, as the aspects of the rhetorical context engage her, she draws on cognitive strategies that lay dormant and hidden in her earlier writing. Some samples from her paper illustrate these changes:

> In today's society, a recent change in the traditional sex roles has developed; both in the home and in the community. Women are now allowed in job fields that were once only considered a masculine job, and more men are working in the home--helping with the housework and childrearing. Although these changes have come about, the family structure isn't actually hurt by them. There are some benefits: the married couple tend to share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations; the husband-wife bond is strengthened by equally sharing the work and other responsibilities; and the parents are more actively involved with their children.

> According to John B. Holland, the family is considered a type of group--one in which their concern is not with national calculations and limited obligations, but with flesh and blood people and their felt obligations to them. The married couple share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations. For example, the husband may be continuing his schooling, and in the process, his wife takes on a part-time job to help him through college. There is nothing in the marriage contract stating that the wife can, or cannot work. Another example could be that the wife's family goes in debt because they missed a $200 rent payment. There is no written obligation on the husband or wife to meet their family's needs, but since they have intimate feelings for these particular relatives, they loan them the money with no questions asked. Neither of these obligations were written on paper, they were merely blanket obligations--which in the final analysis mean--an obligation on each of the marriage partners to help in whatever may arise in their common life together.

What I hope this discussion and these excerpts illustrate is the development of a student writer who becomes increasingly engaged with the topic areas proposed to her for writing about and who is increasingly able to draw on her personal resources to develop them. These resources

include, of course, her increasing familiarity and comfort with the nature of academic tasks, practice in using source materials as evidence and as initiator of material to use in her writing, and confidence that she may practice the increasingly complex strategies of explaining, inferring, assessing, deducing, abstracting, summarizing, evaluating, concluding, reflecting, classifying, hypothesizing, exploring, projecting, and speculating. It seems clear that perfunctory responses to generalized writing tasks will only draw on a small range of these cognitive operations while more engaged and commited responses foster increasingly complex responses.

One additional characteristic of this student's writing reinforces the development just described. As this student moved through the tasks, her reliance on the source texts dropped off markedly. Her first paper consisted primarily of a string of quotations taken directly from the source materials, loosely held together by transitional sentences (an all too familiar pattern for freshman compositions). Her second paper, while eschewing direct quotations, consisted primarily of material paraphrased from the source materials. Only with the third paper, did the writer reconceive the way in which the source materials could be used, this time as a take-off point for the development of her own ideas. Three brief excerpts illustrate this progression:

> Expository paper: Rodriguez chose to further his education in an American way..."When I was beginning grade school, I noted to myself the fact that the classroom environment was so different in its styles and assumptions from my own family environment that survival would essentially entail a choice between both worlds." He obviously chose to go on and further his education, thus leaving his Chicano past behind.

There is no question that the selected quotation is germane to the point that the writer wishes to make. But her extensive dependence on the

exact language of the source texts reflects her uncertainty about analyzing the experiences of the writers whose lives she has been reading about. Stringing together a chain of direct quotations is a deliberate strategy, one often invoked by student writers who wish to avoid any deeper level of engagement with the materials being presented, sometimes because the student does not understand the source material well enough to even paraphrase it. As a cognitive strategy, direct quotation allows the writer to fulfill the demands of providing specific examples and details in support of her generalizations while at the same time presenting only surface inferences to link the meanings together if, in fact, any inferences are supplied at all.

> Argumentative paper: One argument against college is that the salary differential between college graduates and other Americans is narrowing. According to the article about the value of a college diploma, which appeared in a 1975 US News and World Report, in 1969, full-time male workers with four years of college earned 53% more than male workers with four years of high school; in 1978 it decreased to only 40% more...

The argumentative demands of this task require the student to marshall evidence to support her position. This she does, selecting details from the source readings and "plugging them into" the neatly-laid out paragraphs of support. It becomes difficult to separate the inferences she draws independently from those drawn by the authors of the source texts. Only by observing the selection of points for development in the paper do we gain any real insight into the mind of the writer. She has not progressed very much cognitively from the first paper because, for the most part, she is not analyzing, interpreting or evaluating the evidence.

> Speculative paper: "The husband and wife have an intimate relationship based on sentiment, for this is usually why they are united in marriage, because of the special feelings they have for each other. They are kept together by a bond, or feeling of belonging. One aspect of this bond

> is the sharing of work and other responsibilities. The husband helps cook, clean and wash dishes, while the mother helps with the children, or vice versa. Or a situation could arise where the husband is out of work, so the wife supports the family with her job. The husband then takes care of the responsibilities in the home. Since jobs around the house are shared equally, the husband and wife have respect for each other's feelings..."

None of the ideas from the previous excerpt came directly from either the readings in the class or from the class discussions. Rather, in this paper the student has used the topic and the contextual cues as an opportunity to explore an aspect of her thinking hitherto unanalyzed. Although her analysis may appear unsophisticated, it is evidence of her willingness to take risks in her writing that might have seemed impossible to anyone viewing her earlier writing in the course when she appeared to be completely boxed in by the constraints of academic writing. She has freed herself from the bondage of the source texts, she has reconceived the generalized task into one that is personally meaningful for her, and she has utilized cognitive strategies in her response that were previously untapped.

Such an analysis vindicates the notion that multiple texts must be looked at before it is possible to draw conclusions about a writer's ability and performance. Furthermore, it strongly suggests that a writer must be strongly urged to create a meaningful task from a generalized one if increasingly complex cognitive strategies are going to be exercised and fostered.

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